

An Augmentee's Perspective of the Air Force Program Budget Decision Cycle

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It's not just a job...Whoops! Wrong service, but the description aptly applies to the fascinating adventure the five of us had while augmenting the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Budget, (SAF/FMB) staff for three months during the recent Program Budget Decision (PBD) cycle. In the next 1,900 words or so, we'll give you the "skinny" on what the PBD cycle is, what roles we played, the pros and cons of being an augmentee (both on and off the job), and how you can get a shot at doing what we did.

PBD Process Description

What is this mysterious process carrying the name of "PBD cycle?" To fully understand the PBD cycle, we must first explain why it happens and where it fits into the larger Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS) schedule. We'll assume you know PPBS basics. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) issues the Defense Planning Guidance (usually in November), triggering the Services to start their engines for the Program Objective Memorandums (POMs). After the Service POMs

are completed and submitted to OSD (typically in the May time frame), feedback comes via OSD Program Decision Memorandums (PDMs). The PDMs go into the hands of the Services who must make them part of the update known as the Budget Estimates Submission (BES). By September, after OSD gets its hands on the Service BESs—enter stage right the Program Budget Decision cycle, usually lasting from October through December. PBDs are OSD's way of making detailed adjustments to the Service's proposed budgets. When the Services and OSD have finally reviewed all PBDs, OSD "locks down" the budget and everyone begins the documentation for Congress and preparation of the Future Years Defense Program. The result is the President's Budget, which is normally submitted to Congress in early February.



From Left to Right: Maj Gen Stringer, Capt Chris Svehlak, Ms Kat Pierce, Gen Michael Ryan, Capt John Stone, and Capt Jim Reitzel. Missing from photograph is Capt Jennifer Kleinschmidt.

That's a macro look at the sequence of events. Let's go micro. OSD analysts dissect the Services BES's, comparing the exhibit data to testimony from Congressional hearings, previous year's submissions, Defense Appropriation and Authorization bills, and a multitude of other references. The purpose is to cross-check the programs and flush-out any inconsistencies. The PBDs are written in draft, and those pertaining to the Air Force are sent to "PBD Central," the Budget Programs Directorate (SAF/FMBP), where they are farmed out to various offices on the Air Staff/Secretariat and dispatched to MAJCOMs. A draft PBD offers the Services the opportunity to weigh the merits and assess the impacts of the PBD, and return a response to OSD prior to a final decision by the DEPSECDEF.

So what happens to a PBD when it leaves OSD as a draft? This year, OSD went "electronic" with the process for the first time—the PBDs are now launched over the phone lines and into e-mail. Enter us, the "MAJCOM rentals." Receipt of a PBD demands rapid response – immediate distribution is necessary because OSD specifies a "respond by" date and time on the PBD, usually 48 hours or less. We distribute copies to what seems like every 2- and 3-letter office in the Air Force (in reality about 84 copies, e-mail covering the majority of them). What a difference the use of e-mail makes! From all outward appearances, e-mail fosters a much smoother PBD process and causes less destruction to Brazilian rain forest acreage via paper copies.

Draft PBD Particulars

The Air Force staff agency Office of Primary Responsibility (OPR) and a SAF/FMB Office of Collateral Responsibility (OCR) study the PBD analysis, determine the impacts and ramifications of the PBD, and arrive at a tentative "position" with accompanying rationale. The Air Force has three options when issued a draft PBD: (1) accept, (2) accept with comments, or (3) reclama. The OPR/OCR prepare a "skull sheet," summarizing the recommended position. A skull sheet is not to be confused with a skull in the morbid sense; rather, it is very similar in appearance to a point paper (basically giving a background, discussion, and bottom line on the PBD). Next comes a skull pre-brief with SAF/FMB, Maj Gen Stringer, who is also the Air Force Board (AFB) Chairman when PBDs are addressed. Later the same day, the AFB is convened to allow the appropriate Air Staff leaders to review the PBDs and the recommendations of the OPR, discuss potential impacts, and determine an official AF position. Because of the sheer volume of PBDs and the variety of suspense dates, an AFB is usually held three or more times a week during the cycle. For example, the PBD cycle started this year on 10 October 1997 and ended some 126 PBDs later on 19 December 1997, and included 30 AFB meetings during that period. Once the AFB develops the Air Force position, that position is documented in a memorandum signed by SAF/FMB and handcarried to OSD. OSD considers our response and publishes the final decision in a PBD when it is signed by the DEPSECDEF.

Resolving Differences

Meanwhile, the AFB must decide if the PBD warrants designation as an "Out-of-Court" or a "Major Budget Issue." The Out-of-Court session is a face-to-face meeting with the DoD Comptroller, with the Air Force represented by SAF/FM, SAF/FMB, and senior people with a stake in the issues. Hopefully, this session will resolve many of the major disconnects caused by PBD actions. If that fails, there is still a court of last resort. Designating a PBD as a Major Budget Issue (MBI) means that the Air Force and OSD cannot reach agreement and a program or policy is jeopardized with so serious an impact on AF operations to warrant the personal attention of the Secretary of the Air Force (SECAF) and Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF). The corporate structure recommends, but the Chief and Secretary ultimately determine, which PBDs are forwarded to the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) as MBIs. This leads to a meeting between SECAF/CSAF and SECDEF/DEPSECDEF in mid-December. The SECDEF makes the final determination on all MBIs.

Enter the Augmentees

Where do we, the Augmentees, fit in? And what do we do? Our job description, if there was one, would certainly contain a lot of "ings"—handling, copying, coordinating, typing, e-mailing, distributing, delivering, inserting, withdrawing, running, and calling, just to offer a few. From receiving the initial draft PBD to delivering the signed response; from maintaining "Smart Books" for AF/CV, SAF/

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FM, and other senior leaders to preparing for AFB meetings; from being the “marshall” at SAF/FMB skull sessions to recording the minutes during meetings; and from managing the SAF/FMBP database to updating the PBD hotline, being an augmentee covers just about every angle, nook and cranny of the cycle.

Personal Perspectives

What’s fun? A lot of faceless names we may have previously referred to as “those-clueless-Air-Staffers-living-in-a-cave” have now solidly earned our deep respect and admiration. Not only do they really care about the programs and fight for our issues, but they work REAL hard at it. Hard like 0600 to 1930+ five or more days a week. Hard like arguing vigorously with OSD analysts to preserve O&M funding. And hard like wanting more after doing a 3 to 4 year Pentagon stint. And they manage to answer seemingly endless questions from the MAJCOMs, keeping a smile all the while. There’s no doubt the 26,000-some-odd workers of the Pentagon have earned our respect.

What’s less than fun? We can answer that one with the three “W’s”—waiting, walking, and withdrawal. PBD’s flow in fits and starts. That leads to waiting. Waiting for the PBDs to start flowing. Waiting for the preliminary position and the skull sheet. Waiting for the AFB to meet. But when the surge hit, activity rocketed exponentially. However, the waiting did give us the opportunity to discuss the PBDs among ourselves, learn about operations at different commands, and tap the brain power of the SAF/FM “residents.” Then there’s the walking—lots and lots of it. Daily distribution runs around the building certainly kept us in shape! For example, one trip around the E-ring (the outermost ring of the Pentagon) is purported to equal one mile, and there are 18 miles of corridors and hallways in all (not to mention the stairs—no elevators—between five floors and the basement). We were easily able to classify some days as 4- or 5-milers with the spread-out distribution routes. Offices were inevitably on different floors, different rings, and different corridors. That made for some sore feet and aching calf muscles...or some excellent conditioning and networking, depending on your perspective. Some offices get “hard” copies of the PBDs, and that offered us an excellent opportunity during distribution runs to meet staff personnel and executive officers not only in SAF/FM, but in other areas as well. Finally, the third “W”—withdrawal. The 2-month TDY is long and as you would expect, all of us missed our families, friends, and homes.

Down Time in D.C.

The important stuff. Yes, we did work long days, but the evenings (what was left of them by the time we got home!) and the weekends were ours. Of utmost importance to an enjoyable stay, as they say in real estate, is the location of your hotel/suite/apartment. It absolutely, positively must be near a Metro (subway) station—driving a car around D.C. is an unnecessary headache. The Metro goes directly to or within short walking distance of all the area highlights and sights. Some of the things we saw and did, included sitting just a few yards away from President Clinton as he gave his Veteran’s Day address in Arlington National Cemetery; feasting in various Georgetown and Old Town Alexandria restaurants; studying Picasso, Renoir, and Matisse in the National Gallery of Art; gazing at the 21-ton granite crypt of John Paul Jones at the Naval Academy; standing at the foot of the Washington Monument and seeing the Reflecting Pool, Lincoln Memorial, White House, and U.S. Capitol, just by turning around; and the list goes on. With some comfortable shoes you’ll never be bored! Sunny in D.C.? Hike around Teddy Roosevelt Island or East Potomac Park. Snowing or rainy? Then it’s “M&M” time—museums (Smithsonian, National Museums, etc.) and shopping malls. You won’t have a shortage of off-duty things to do and see!

How to be an Augmentee

Every July SAF/FMB sends out a call letter to the MAJCOMs, asking for nominations to “come on down” and work the cycle. Your MAJCOM/FM executive officer is the person likely to staff this request. Grade requirements are not specific, but O-3, Senior NCO, or GS-11 are the targets. The TDY usually stretches from the first week in October until mid-December. However, the per diem is adequate, the sights very exciting, and the experience absolutely unique! Our hats are off to our MAJCOM Comptrollers for allowing us to participate, and a big THANKS to Maj Gen Stringer, Col Dave Price, Maj Tom Reilly, and Capt Clay Bridges of SAF/FMB for their leadership and support...and for patiently answering our ceaseless barrage of questions!